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ABSTRACT

This article examines community-school alliances in three rural South Dakota schools that aim to help at-risk students. Takini School is located on the Cheyenne River Reservation and serves the Lakota Sioux Indians. The area has high unemployment rates, high dropout rates, and high alcohol and drug abuse rates. The school's alcohol and drug counselor invites the community to programs on "prevention and intervention" of drug and alcohol abuse. The school has consulted tribal elders for ideas tc address the problems. Gene Thin Elk says that the alcoholic culture will disappear only when replaced by traditional Lakota values. A second school is located in Estelline, a farm and retirement town with 37 private businesses and nice neighborhoods. Despite the town's appeal, the economy is depressed and there is an alcohol problem. The school counselor has started an awareness group for students grades 7-12 who are children of alcoholics. She also chairs the Drug and Alcohol Prevention Team, which is a coalition of school and community professionals. In addition, Estelline's program of academic restructuring emphasizes community input. Belle Fourche, a western style town involved mainly in ranching and mining, is part of an alliance of 12 school districts that provide residential and day programs for at-risk students. The cooperative brings a mobile lab to Belle Fourche to assess students at risk for future unemployment due to undiagnosed problems. A prescriptive plan is then developed for the student and a transitional care residence is provided for recovering from substance abuse. (KS)

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How Rural Schools Can Build Alliances for At-Risk Youth

This article examines what three rural South Dakota schools are doing to reach youth-at-risk. In all three, schools are taking lead roles in forming community alliances to reach these young people.

Although the towns examined here are all in South Dakota, they represent vastly different rural lifestyles. One is a Sioux reservation community, another a farm town, and the third a ranch and mining town. The specific methods behind what they are doing for at-risk youth are of less importance than the fact that those methods evolved from studying local needs and unique resources. I do not present the methods as models. What I would like to present is the necessity for community self-study as a first step in reaching youth-at-risk, followed by alliance building.

Cheyenne River Reservation - This is an area the size of Connecticut where just 7,000 people live . . . the Lakota Sioux or Miniconjue. The landscape is a treeless prairie broken here and there by high buttes. The people, when they distinguish between themselves and whites, usually call themselves Indians, not Native Americans. They will talk about their obvious poverty but are quick to add that demographics don't tell the whole story. They speak of a growing sense of community and a need to address long-standing problems their own way.

Unemployment on the reservation as a whole runs 70 to 85 percent but is worse on the west side, probably 95 percent. The west side is served by Takini School ("takini" means "survivor" in Lakota), with 250 students K - 12.

"The school is really the only employer," says superintendent Ken Englehardt. That puts his staff in a peculiar position for teachers. They are the "haves," their neighbors the "have nots". Teachers must be careful how they address problems so parents won't think them elitist.

RC 018478

A long hall runs east to west through Takini School. Primary students start at the east end and will, over the years, move toward high school rooms on the west end. But most don't make it to the end. If today's eighth graders follow established patterns, just 20 percent will be here in four years to get a diploma.

Teachers find it hard to talk about the value of a diploma in an environment where most graduates, like drop-outs, are unemployed. Steve Petz teaches a Careers Class but most of his students "don't see parents getting up and going to work. It's not something within their experience." Petz is working to schedule field trips to see various businesses and occupations. That means driving hundreds of miles.

He thinks some economic development here would retain and bring back graduates who could improve the quality of life. But it would have to be businesses with local roots, so the school has begun teaching entrepreneurship. The reservation has been burned before by outside business people whose promises have not translated to dollars in the local economy.

But the reservation's number one problem hampers economic development, and dashes many hopes. The tribal government estimates 95 percent of reservation residents are directly or indirectly affected by alcohol and other drug abuse. Takini teachers say that's a conservative estimate. One theory holds that alcohol was a weapon the federal government used in hopes of destroying these people.

Whatever the history, the effects on Takini children are brutal. Of 311 substantiated child abuse and neglect cases across the reservation last year, more than 90 percent were triggered by alcohol. Everyone knows the 311 figure represents a tiny fraction of actual cases. Teachers speak of families shattered by alcohol, of molestation in homes where ten or more people share a bedroom, of seven-year-olds who are responsible for younger sibblings days at a time.

The school building is completely drug and alcohol free. There's not even a smoking area for teachers. Students, says superintendent Englehardt, must see the school as "a safe environment, free of pressures to drink or take drugs, staffed by people who will help however they can."

LaVonne Dupris, the school's full-time alcohol and drug counselor, works in all classrooms. She's using the school building

for Alateen meetings. She's inviting the community to programs on "prevention and intervention."

The school recently opened a special coping room. Students devastated by weekend drinking in their homes come to school Monday tired, hungry, and emotionally spent. By Thursday they may be bracing themselves for the coming weekend. The room's staff helps students recover and prepare. Much of what students need to talk about are the issues of life and death like, "What should I do if there's a fire and all the adults are too drunk to help?"

More and more, the school is turning to tribal elders and other local leaders for ideas like the coping room, rather than relying on outsiders.

Gene Thin Elk, a healer and writer, spoke recently to Takini teachers. He believes Native Americans here are dealing with three cultures: Native American, white, and the culture of alcoholism . . . "a culture in itself, a whole way of life, a whole belief system, a whole value system."

Thin Elk says the alcoholic culture will disappear only when replaced by another powerful set of values. He advocates teaching young people traditional Lakota ways. A society committed to true Lakota beliefs would see alcohol and drug abuse as defiling the sacredness of all living things, and the Earth Mother. Thin Elk also thinks students should be told the world needs to hear about their culture.

"We have a connectedness to the origins of our people," he says. "The teachings of our people are still among us -- the songs, the dances, the ceremonies. Many cultures are separated from that. They're longing for that touch, that connectedness."

Turning to the Lakota culture for answers for at-risk youth represents bold steps taken in recent years. Only a generation ago, Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and parochial schools on this reservation forbade even speaking the Lakota language.

Estelline - Two-hundred-eighty miles east of Takini School, amid rolling farm land and glacial lakes, is Estelline. With 750 residents, Estelline's population is holding steady. It's a farm town and retirement town (thanks largely to a municipal hospital and nursing home), with 37 private businesses. Unlike some neighboring towns, hit hard by the 1980s agricultural crisis, Estelline's homes are neatly painted, and the yards nicely trimmed.

Still, people say, there's a feeling all this could fall apart. The local economy is depressed. Five dollars an hour is considered good pay here; many residents have to commute to jobs in larger towns 25 miles away. In Estelline $25,000 or $30,000 will buy a fine house, even though housing is tight, and people worry about their property values falling even lower.

"Sometimes there's very real frustration with the economic situation," says Barb Goodfellow, school counselor for all grades (240 students). Residents who boast there's no drug problem here ignore what Goodfellow calls "Estelline's drug of choice": Alcohol. She feels frustrations combined with a lack of social outlets has made heavy drinking acceptable among some adults to the point that they turn their heads to adolescent drinking.

Goodfellow recently started an awareness group for students grades 7 - 12 who are children of alcoholics. She also chairs a Drug and Alcohol Prevention Team which tries to "impact students and their decision-making about substances." The team is a coalition of school and community professionals -- teachers, the county health nurse, the county sheriff and a deputy, Estelline's two policemen, two ministers, and two business people.

But there's a point, says Goodfellow, where communication between human services providers breaks down. Teachers and other school personnel know students, and in many cases their families, well. They could be invaluable resources for Department of Social Services child protection workers, or juvenile court workers, or for when kids need the state mental health system or psychiatric hospital in Sioux Falls. But, in an environment where working together should be easy, these agencies work independently, seldom even communicating with others who serve the same children. Because they are modeled after urban agencies, these local agencies seem unable to plug themselves into small-town modes of interaction.

A year ago Estelline committed itself to a program of academic restructuring which calls for more community input. One goal of this restructuring is to help students see opportunities for local entrepreneurship -- to slow the "brain drain" where graduates leave rural South Dakota for urban careers. Estelline business people, in particular, have responded enthusiastically, coming into classrooms as speakers, involving students in community planning, and more.

Goodfellow reminds people that restructuring and school/community cooperation must extend to at-risk youth, and not stop with the "best and brightest."

People have been receptive to that message. After all, one resident told me, while the "best and brightest" often move on to college and distant careers, at-risk youth "usually stay right here, drop out and face unemployment right here, and in ten years or less we're educating their kids."

During the week I spent in Estelline -- talking to educators, students, parents, and business people -- it struck me that if any local institution could pull together alliances, it was the school system. The schools are the focus of community life. If there's a positive side to the lack of social outlets Goodfellow referred to, it's that school plays, athletic events, and concerts are major community functions, drawing people from all walks of life. When the weekly Estelline Journal came off the press during my visit, 12 of 19 stories were about the schools.

Belle Fourche - By South Dakota standards, Belle Fourche is almost too big to be considered rural. The population is just under 5000. The town lies 400 miles west of Estelline near the Wyoming border, just north of the Black Hills. While Estelline's feel is Midwestern, Belle Fourche's is definitely western. Businesses cater to area ranchers and Black Hills summer tourists, and many residents commute to jobs at Black Hills gold mines or Wyoming bentonite mines.

"Some people are embarrassed about being a cowtown," says chamber of commerce director Kathy Wainman.

"People from away are surprised we have electricity and bathrooms," says a high school senior.

That kind of thinking meant for years people assumed Belle Fourche could improve itself and address problems only by studying urban models.

But no longer. Paul Dingeman, high school principal, says it's time for small towns to understand who they are and to draw upon their own strengths. His office is an example of that thinking. It's open to students who want to say good morning to Dingeman or visit with the secretaries. That personal interaction and easy access are part of what small towns are all about, says Dingeman.

"To survive rural communities have to become one extended

family, one interactive, collaborative system," he says. "I'm talking about severe restructuring not only in schools, but in community functioning."

His staff "knows better than anyone" who comes from problem homes, who's at risk for addiction or prison. Hand Dingeman a piece of paper and he'll draw a model of his dream school. The school becomes the hub of a system linking law enforcement, social services, and mental health programs. He envisions shared expertise, and communication between professionals who know and respect one another.

He also sees an expanded role for schools, providing ongoing professional training.

"We have social workers today being trained in college programs that prepare you to work the same way whether you're in New York or Belle Fourche," he says. Why not provide social workers additional training about local problems and unique resources before they begin work in Belle Fourche? Likewise, why not train policemen to "serve their own people" rather than expecting them to model their work after urban police forces?

In fact, Dingeman goes so far as to say maybe urban schools should study rural schools that have dealt successfully with at-risk youth and other problems. Rural schools -- "without the bureaucracy, the overwhelming numbers" -- would be logical national labs for developing effective programs.

But that brings up another issue: There would have to be good salaries to keep teachers in these rural labs over the long haul. Dingeman knows well the frustration of developing teachers just out of college, only to see them move to better paying positions after getting a couple years of experience. To turn Belle Fourche into a true lab, there would have to be outside money.

What has Belle Fourche done to reach at-risk youth?

In addition to building community alliances similar to those in Estelline, Belle Fourche is part of an alliance of school districts. In 1980 Belle Fourche was a charter member of Black Hills Special Services Cooperative, a consortium of 12 school districts that considers services to at-risk youth a high priority.

In 1981 the Cooperative started the area's first alternative school, providing residential as well as day programs. Just this past year, Belle Fourche's civic leaders arranged for 16 of the Cooperative's alternative school students to attend school in a

building in the town's business district, close to community activities and job opportunities. Also last year, the Cooperative opened a residence in Belle Fourche for adolescent girls removed from their homes by the courts or Social Services.

The Cooperative brings a mobile lab to Belle Fourche to assess students at risk for future unemployment due to undiagnosed problems. A prescriptive plan is then developed. A transitional care residence for adolescents recovering from substance abuse and in-depth inservice relating to at-risk youth are among other services Belle Fourche and its allied school districts have established through their cooperative.

Summary - "Self-determination" is a term I heard again and again on the Cheyenne River Reservation, meaning the people there are prepared to chart their own course after a century of failed leadership by outsiders. To some extent all the rural schools I visited are thinking in terms of "self-determination" regarding at-risk youth. They see little outside leadership, with urban models viewed as generally inappropriate for their populations. As a result they are looking at local resources, and finding creative thinking and promising alliances.